

HB 2548

My name is Jennifer Euwer and I am writing to you as a small family farmer and member of a fruit packing/marketing co-operative made up of 60 small family farms.

I raise pears and cherries in the Hood River Valley.

Maintaining a small family farm has become increasingly difficult in Oregon. Labor and housing account for over half our expenses. The prices we receive for our fruit are dictated by the market, which is dominated by the 5 largest retail chains in the US: Costco, Krogers, Sams Club, Walmart and Safeway.

Because our pears and cherries are both perishable and indistinguishable from our competitors once they are packed to USDA standards, the buyers can keep going back and forth between us for a lower price until they have squeezed nearly any possible profit out of our product. We are overmatched by stores like Wal-Mart and Costco that operate world wide and have enormous power.

Belonging to a co-op is one of the few ways we have to increase our market power a bit, but it doesn't begin to compete with the power of the buyers.

If a politician wanted to increase the ability of farmers to pay higher wages they could start by working to break up the consolidation and monopolization of the grocery industry. Or they could look into the environmental and human costs of importing 60% of the fruit we eat in this country. That imported produce comes with a large carbon footprint and without any protections to the human beings in other countries doing the growing and harvesting.

Nevertheless our legislature continues to justify raising our costs by insisting that we "Pass them on to the consumer." One does not need a degree in economics to realize that is completely impossible. We farmers live in the market that operates most closely to pure competition. We grow a similar product and compete with each other to sell it to the more powerful buyers. We have no way to pass anything on.

HB 2548 will have the chilling effect of forcing farms my size to sell out to larger and larger farms. Those are the "corporate" farms that you imagine you are targeting with this bill. As our margins disappear we have no choice but to try to farm larger and larger acreages or sell out.

This would be far from "progressive" legislation. This bill will make it ever more difficult for a diverse new generation of farmers to get into agriculture. The cost of establishing a farming operation is onerous, this would add exponentially to that cost.

As farmers we comply with OSHA housing and workplace regulations, BOLI and Farmworker Protection Standards, Minimum wage rules, overtime rules, the Federal Adverse Effect Wage Rate and of course all the regulations that other non-agricultural businesses comply with.

Our workforce is the most crucial part of our farm team. We treat them fairly not because we are forced to by regulators, but because they deserve it. And they have options—they could work elsewhere at any time. Nevertheless we have negligible turnover year to year.

Averaged over the year, our employees earn well above the state minimum hourly wage. They do some hourly work, but earn up to twice as much (or more) when doing piece work while thinning, pruning and harvesting pears and cherries. They and their families are provided OSHA approved year round housing.

They are able to save money that other hourly workers in our economy are spending on rent.

I'm asking you to oppose HB 2548 because it threatens small family farms across Oregon.

You can make Oregon the most expensive place to grow food in the US (or perhaps the world) but YOU CANNOT CHANGE HOW MUCH THE GROCERY CONGLOMERATES PAY US.

Oregon already has some of the highest labor costs in the country, and after several tough years, I can't afford more regulations and wage increases.

HB 2548 unfairly targets agriculture by taking away at-will employment, meaning I wouldn't be able to make necessary staffing decisions without the risk of costly lawsuits. One claim can cost tens of thousands of dollars or more. Why should farmers be forced to keep employees who may not meet performance expectations or adapt to the demands of the job? All other sectors in Oregon would be at-will, but farms—whose employment needs are impacted by weather, yields, trade, pests, diseases, etc.—would not. Not only is that unfair, but it will likely result in job loss, not job security.

This bill doesn't help workers or consumers; it just makes farming harder and more expensive. I have already had to manage hours to comply with agricultural overtime, and HB 2548 could force me to make tough operational choices like reducing my workforce, changing crops, automating, or selling the operation.

I urge you to vote no to protect our farms and jobs.